

Regulating UK supermarkets: an oral-history perspective

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Executive summary

- The case for tightened regulation of supermarket retailers through competition legislation and land-use planning has become a prominent issue for policy makers and communities.
- The AHRC Reconstructing Consumer Landscapes Project has recently conducted an oral history of the coming of the supermarket and self service to post-war England. The very early findings of this project are used in this paper to bring a historical perspective to the debate.
- The supermarket did not simply supersede independent and family shops: multiple stores are a long-standing part of the British retail landscape and consumers have been comfortably making use of them for more than a century.
- Historically, ownership mattered less to consumers than has previously been assumed: it was the service offered by stores that played the crucial role in determining consumer satisfaction.
- Policy makers should therefore give in-store experience more consideration.
- Consumer choice was shaped not just by the variety of goods on offer, but by social and cultural factors such as class, gender and ethnicity.
- There is therefore a need for a diverse range of services and goods that reflects the varied social and cultural background of consumers.
- Historically, small shops have played an important role in communities, but multiple stores have also fostered social interaction and cohesion.
- Policy makers should look beyond the question of ownership and size to recognise that well-managed service encounters can foster social interaction for shoppers in a diversity of retail spaces.

Introduction

The possible tightening of regulation of supermarket retailing through competition legislation and town planning has become a prominent issue for policy makers and communities. In the past five years, the debate has intensified. The growth of large supermarkets is seen by some to have led to the decay of the high street and has raised questions of land use. One of the three main concerns of the 2000 Competition Commission was to investigate 'continuing concern that large out-of-town supermarkets were contributing to the decay of the high street in many towns.' The 'Clone Town Britain Survey', released by the New Economics Foundation in June 2005, heavily criticised the current state of UK retail, arguing that Britain's high streets are now dominated by faceless chains that reduce the amount of choice on offer to the consumer. In 2006, further arguments were advanced by the 'High Street Britain 2015' report, assembled by a House of Commons select committee. This report argued that the small shop would be virtually extinct by 2015, substantially reducing consumer choice, if government bodies did not take action. The British Retail Consortium concluded that the report sought to 'turn back the clock,' and that consumers over the past 20 years had clearly demonstrated their preference for large supermarkets by 'voting with their feet.'

Policy makers face very difficult decisions when considering the complex and varied economic, social and environmental impacts of retail change and its implications for consumers. The history of retail in Britain, and in particular the history of the transition from counter-service shops to self-service stores and the supermarket, has an important part to play in this debate. In the 1950s and 1960s the retail landscape of Britain was at an important juncture in its history. It included counter-service stores, new self-service stores and the first supermarkets. A greater knowledge of shoppers' experiences of different retail formats, as encountered by late-modern British consumers, has the potential to enrich policy makers' understanding of the impact of changes on contemporary high streets. The recent discussions of the merits of 'traditional' small shops in contrast to the supermarket, make this period particularly relevant to the debate. The Arts and Humanities Research Council funded research project 'Reconstructing Consumer Landscapes', based at the Universities of Exeter and Surrey, is currently conducting an oral history of consumer responses to the coming of the supermarket and self-service to England in the period 1945 to 1975. By exploring the early findings of the project this paper will shed new light on the debate over the impact of retail change on consumers, including how social identity affected consumer experience and the importance of sociability within the shop.

High Street Britain 1955: the retail landscape

The past British retail landscape plays an important role in contemporary debates. According to the 'Clone Town Britain Survey', 'retail spaces once filled with a thriving mix of independent butchers, newsagents, tobacconists, pubs, bookshops, greengrocers and family-owned general stores are fast being filled with faceless supermarket retailers, fast-food chains, mobile phone shops and global fashion outlets.' However, retail change in late-twentieth-century Britain has not simply been about the replacement of independent shops with the supermarket. The reality was more complex. A typical British high street in 1955 would have included independent shops as well as those owned by multiple and co-operative retail organisations. Counter-service grocery shops were increasingly competing with new self-service stores and the very first supermarkets.

The economic benefits of multiple food retailing ensured that this business model had a large share of the mid-twentieth-century retail landscape. In Britain between the wars, companies with multiple grocery shops grew rapidly, due in part to the increased spending power of the working classes as well as the increased availability of cheap, imported foods. It is estimated that in 1939 co-operative retail societies accounted for as much as 24% of the total sales in the retail groceries and provisions market and multiple retailers for as much as 25% (Jefferys, 1954). Although independent retailers are often remembered as 'small shops', in mid-twentieth-century Britain this was not always the case. Independent retailers could operate a very large store and in a locality it could be the most significant.

The supermarket emerged in the United States of America in the early-twentieth century. It was a huge success with customers and it was estimated that by 1940 40% of food shopping in the United States was done through the supermarket. The supermarket and self-service shopping came more slowly to Britain. The first self-service food experiments were started on a small scale by the co-operative movement before the end of the Second World War, but few grocers followed this trend. It is estimated that there were just ten self-service shops in Britain in 1947.

The conversion to self service was costly and required building materials and construction-industry labour that were both in scarce supply, so not every company could afford to convert their stores immediately. Moreover, companies were restricted by the existing properties their shops occupied. These were often too small for conversion into supermarkets, so unless they built from scratch they could only create small-scale self-service stores. Some large multiple stores, such as Home Colonial, had experimented with self service but did not initially consider that it would be successful. And not everyone concerned with the grocery trade believed that self service would take off. For example, in 1947 the trade journal *The Grocer* commented that 'the people of this country have long been accustomed to counter-service, and it is doubtful whether they would be content to wander round a store hunting for goods.'

However, during the late 1950s and 1960s self-service shops and supermarkets spread throughout Britain. Following the demise of rationing, there was a rapid growth in personal consumption in the 1950s. This allowed the supermarket to develop. Both the government and some elements of the grocery trade were also keen to promote self-service stores, which were seen as more efficient for the customer and for the retailer, particularly as they required less labour. In 1950 around 50 supermarkets were in existence, increasing in number to 572 by 1961. A number of new supermarket chains emerged. Premier, Victor Value and Fine Fare had 330 supermarkets between them by mid 1961. By 1969, five years after the abolition of Resale Price Maintenance (agreements between manufacturers and their distributors that products would be sold at certain prices) there were reported to be 3400 supermarkets in Great Britain.

Experience in store: the appeal of counter service

While the ownership of stores mattered to consumers on one level (for example, many consumers chose to shop at the Co-op because of the benefit offered by the dividend), consumers' experiences within the store and the kind of service they were offered were also seen as important. During the 1950s many multiples such as Lipton, Home Colonial and some co-operative societies continued to offer counter service in their stores. Far from being seen as 'faceless', many 1950s multiple and co-operative stores with counter service, were remembered as friendly and local. A respondent who shopped in Newcastle Under Lyme during the 1950s recalled favouring the local Co-op: 'that was where I first met the Co-op and goodness they were good... we had a butcher who delivered but the Co-op seemed to offer everything else.'

The visual process of counter service could delight and fascinate the onlooker. Multiple counter-service stores such as Lipton and Home Colonial were remembered with particular affection. Interviewees were particularly likely to recall the process of butter making, slicing the cheese, and the cutting of the ham. But such pleasures were just as likely in a branch of Sainsbury's or Lipton, as in a 'family' provisions dealer or butchers. One respondent also commented:

It'd been Home and Colonial and Lipton's and things before and they were a pleasure, those dried goods we used to call them, the grocer's that's what you meant when you said the grocer. But it was all cupboards and drawers and a bit like the chemist in a way... so you knew that you had this expertise that you don't use now.

It was not the independent shop itself, but the quality and kind of service offered within that was valued. Some consumers relished the opportunity to sit down during shopping, and allow counter-service attendants to fulfil their needs. An interviewee who shopped near Banbury and on the Isle of Wight in the 1950s, remembered that: 'You could always have a sit-down in the grocer's shop - there was always a stool or something so it was more of a pleasure shopping rather than a chore.' But, crucially, not all consumers responded to counter service in the same way. As the following section will show, social context was also a key factor in determining consumer choice.

Consumer choice: the impact of class, age, gender and ethnicity

At the heart of the contemporary debate over the supermarket is the issue of consumer choice. It is seen as an essential impetus towards and indicator of appropriate competition and economic health, in addition to a basic civil right. According to the 'High Street 2015' report, the erosion of the small shop is likely to have a catastrophic impact on future consumer choice: 'The biggest losers, however, will be the consumers. Restricted choice of store brands, restricted choice of available products, restricted choice of shopping locations, higher prices and reduced customer service are all strong possibilities in 2015. Although some consumers today may be benefiting from a competitive market this is entirely unsustainable and cannot continue.' Recent academic research has also underlined the importance of the social aspects of consumption. A study of contemporary consumption in the Portsmouth area has noted that: 'For individuals the reality of consumer choice is less about the "economics" of shopping, which for example, tend to privilege price over other aspects of choice, and more to do with the lived experience of consumers and how they interact with the retail outlets that are provided... Retailers and planners need to find better ways of representing the complexity and diversity of choice within and between neighbourhoods.' (Jackson et al, 2006). A historical perspective on

consumer choice reveals why past consumers chose different kinds of retail format, and the impact of social differences on consumer choice.

Reactions to counter service in contrast to the benefits of self service in the 1950s and 1960s were shaped by the social background of consumers. Class, age, gender and, in some cases, ethnicity were important factors in shaping shopping experience, and conditioning choice of shop. An older, middle-class shopper might favour counter service and the 'deference' that it entailed. Counter service could be a more intimidating experience for younger or working-class customers. Locality and the established relationship of the shop staff and the community also had a role to play. Within a small, close-knit community, an unusual or extravagant purchase might be noted and widely reported. A respondent who shopped at counter service stores in Abbey Wood before her first local supermarket opened in the late 1950s, remembered:

In the small shops there was a slightly condescending air... By a more mature person behind the counter, and you were young, they thought that someone of twenty/twenty-one who was married, you know, wasn't going to know anything... I can remember going to the butchers and I asked for a quarter of a pound of mince because I only wanted a small amount 'cos I was just doing something, I was stuffing something you see. And he looked at me very condescending and he said 'Oh, having a dinner party madam?'

The convenience offered by self service and the first supermarkets was experienced differently according to social background and needs. A young bachelor shopper might have no need to seek out a supermarket and could simply meet his grocery shopping needs by using the nearest possible shops, whatever the type. Alternatively, a housewife shopping for a family might highly prize the convenience of obtaining all her groceries under one roof. One female interviewee who had brought up children and worked at the same time during the 1960s reported that they chose to use the first supermarkets and self service stores because of longer opening hours, fewer queues and the ease of shopping in a single trip. The same interviewee chose to switch to the supermarket because it was more convenient, particularly for working women:

But when I did go back to work, that was when the supermarket was really handy. 'Cos I just didn't have time to do the cooking, because before everything had to be made, you see pastry was made, er any pies and things like that they were all made. Chips of course were made from potatoes, everything had to be done right from scratch. And you accepted it, that was what homemaking was about. But when you were at work you thought 'can I have something quick'.

Some south Asians who had migrated to post-war Britain continued to favour 'ethnic food shops', or to use them alongside the supermarket for cultural reasons. When south Asian groups first migrated to Britain, for those who did not live in an area where the Asian population was concentrated and specialist retail provision developed, it was usual to adopt a dual shopping pattern. Generic provisions were obtained from local outlets, whereas food goods perceived as culturally specific were obtained from further afield, either via retailer delivery or a co-operative system amongst the local community. For example, Harkesh Khabra came with her family from India to Gravesend in Kent in May 1959. Ingredients for meals were bought from Rochester market. The four or five Indian families living in Rochester went collectively to London every month for supplies of 'ethnic foods', but as more south Asians arrived street vans came down from London and a local shop eventually opened. (Harkesh Khabra interviewed by Simon Evans, 1999, Millennium Memory Bank Project, British Library National Sound Archive, C900/07620).

'A social occasion': the sociability of shopping

Considerations of the impact of social interaction when shopping are very evident in recent discussions of retail change. According to 'High Street Britain 2015', the demise of the small shop would mean that 'People will not just be disadvantaged in their role as consumers but also as members of communities. The erosion of small shops is viewed as the erosion of the "social glue" that binds communities together, entrenching social exclusion in the UK.' The AHRC Reconstructing Consumer Landscapes project has found that the social role of shopping was an important part of consumer experience in the 1950s.

A number of interviewees for this project described past shopping as 'a social occasion.' Shoppers expected to interact closely with other members of the local community. Housewives might dress up to visit the shops, even if they did not require credit, or deliberately choose the time of their shopping to coincide with other consumers. An interviewee who was regularly taken shopping with his mother in Guildford in the 1950s, recalled:

...now it's not that at all but certainly in those days and I think that women did make an effort to look their best when they went to the shop because they felt that the shopkeeper must see that they've made an effort.

Once inside the shop, customers might pause for conversations with the staff or other customers. In a series of interviews conducted by the Light Box Museum and Gallery at Woking, Surrey the idea that the atmosphere in shops in Woking was both friendly and familiar occurred repeatedly. Barbara Chasemore remembered that 'everybody knew everybody else and specially the shopkeepers.' Ada Green, born in 1910, recalled that 'you shopped locally and of course everyone knew their customers, you were a person, you know, and they knew what you wanted and what you didn't want.'

Understandings of social interaction within the small shop were temporally specific: its loss was often located in the context of wider social and cultural change. Oral histories suggest that the friendliness of the small shop has become a metaphor for an idealised past system of social relations. An interviewee who shopped near Watford and in London in the late 1950s, recalled:

But everybody did it and you all sort of did your shopping, chatted and probably went for a cup of tea in the little coffee shop, life is more rushed these days, everybody is rushing all the time, clockwatching ... I think it kept people together in villages somehow, that type of shopping.

But while the small shop has played an important role, multiples' stores also contributed to the reinforcement of social ties and communities. In-store social interaction was not limited to one kind of shop. A respondent who lived and shopped in Battersea in the 1950s, had access to a large range of shops on her local high street, including independents and multiples. She chose to shop regularly in the grocery chain David Greig's, privileging the friendliness of the shop over its ownership status: 'We went to David Greig's because we knew people by their Christian names. You know, can you imagine. You know it was Mary and her sister Joan we knew them, although they worked for David Greig's.... They would always talk to you and it was a much friendlier atmosphere.'

The emphasis on the social role of shopping spaces in these narratives reinforces our understanding of the importance of the social experience of shopping to consumers. Although the interviewees believed that past shopping experiences were essentially irrecoverable, and linked to a former society, the nostalgia for these practices is a mark of their perceived value. As with any oral history, the interviews conducted by the project draw attention not only to how the past itself was experienced, but to the construction of memory and the relationship between past experience and present attitudes. Past experience and memories of the counter-service store as a social space continue to inform older consumers' interactions with twenty-first-century retail formats.

Conclusions

Policy makers and interest groups considering the issue of the regulation of supermarkets could benefit from exploring the history of the coming of self service and the supermarket to post-war Britain. The early findings of the AHRC Reconstructing Consumer Landscapes Project show consumers' reactions to changes in the nature of food shopping in this period. Retail change in late-twentieth-century Britain was complex: high streets in 1955 offered a varied mix of independent shops, multiple retailers and co-operative stores. It included counter-service shops, fully self-service stores and hybrid formats. The supermarket and superstore formats we know today and self service became gradually established over a long period of time. Some consumers valued the personal interaction and visual pleasures of counter service. But ownership may matter less than has been previously assumed. Shoppers remembered experiencing the benefits of counter service not only in independent stores, but in multiples

such as Lipton's and the co-operative stores. Historically, consumers from different class, gender and, it would seem in some cases, ethnic backgrounds could respond differently to retail formats. Young working housewives, for example, might favour the speed and convenience of the supermarket. There was then, as now, the need for a range of goods and services responding to the diversity of the community itself. Past shopping was viewed by some as a social occasion, and is a testament to the long history of the small shop's important role in the community. But some consumers remembered that multiple shops could also be pivotal. Multiple shops may therefore have the potential to play a greater role in local communities through the careful management of service within the shop.

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All unattributed quotations are from material collected by the AHRC Reconstructing Consumer Landscapes Project.

Further reading

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Researchers from the University of Exeter and the University of Surrey are together undertaking the Reconstructing Consumer Landscapes Project funded by the UK Arts and Humanities Research Council to examine how the supermarket transformed everyday life in twentieth-century Britain: http://www.sobe.ex.ac.uk/research/consumer_landscapes/shopping/ The project is led by Professor Gareth Shaw (University of Exeter) and Dr Andrew Alexander (University of Surrey), and the research team are Dr Adrian R. Bailey (University of Exeter), Dr Dawn Nell (University of Surrey) and formerly Dr Jane Hamlett (University of Manchester). g.shaw@ex.ac.uk a.alexander@surrey.ac.uk